CHELSEA ROOMING HOUSE

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CHELSEA ROOMING HOUSE

POEMS

BY

HORACE GREGORY

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1930

NEW YORK

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For MARYA *and* JOANNA

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CHELSEA ROOMING HOUSE

An albatross goes flapping high:
he's a shadow in the sky,
far away and far astern,
following and following
like a song you used to sing
but you can't remember how
all the words went, nor the turn
of the melody and now
only half a tune and rhyme
circles in your head and yet
it's a thing you can't forget—
following you all the time.

An albatross is like a girl
you go picking up at night
in the street . . . . or anywhere,
and she'll let you muss her hair
till you get it out of curl—
then she'll kiss you, more or less,
even let you tear her dress . . . .
but she's always far away,
far and almost out of sight . . . .
always like that goddam bird,
like the song you used to sing
that you wish you never heard . . . .
following and following,
all astern of men and ships
following.

And what I say

tastes like bilge against my lips . . . .

Boy, when a man dies, shipmates toss
his body to the albatross.

THE YOUNG WIFE

I left my job on my wedding day
(sleep, my pussy cat, sleep, sleep, sleep)
where walls and skies were brown and gray
I worked ten years on sweat-shop pay;
I'd earn my clothes when the boss felt gay
(sleep sleep sleep)

And all my husband doesn't know
(sleep, my pussy cat, sleep, sleep, sleep)
is good for him. And I can go
back to my boss. He wants me—though
I'm not for trusting men, high or low,
(sleep sleep sleep)

I wait for evening all day through
(sleep, my pussy cat, sleep, sleep, sleep)
no supper's made. A meal or two
a man forgets while love is new—
and he'll forgive me as all men do
(sleep sleep sleep)

A BOY OF TWENTY

Sometimes I hear my name
come up the stairs and walk
through noises in the hall . . . .
but sounds all seem the same
in here, alone at night:
every sound that's made
seems to answer back
until I feel afraid
that chairs and tables talk
at me and want to walk
like noises in the hall
and slide along the wall.

My mouth feels large and black—
I want to answer back
at them.
My lips are tight,
tight shut.
Alone at night,
I sometimes think and feel
some thing of steam and steel
goes crazy and it's falling
in broken, crazy poses,
half-killed . . . .
and sick and crawling,
falls down on tangled streets.
(Streets that the dark sky closes
at both ends, then it meets
itself again, up far

with half a moon and star . . . .
above the tangled streets,
above the sounds that call
up stairways in the hall.)

I never answer back
to sounds that seem the same
as those that make my name,
for noises in the hall
are not my name at all . . . .

HAGEN

Hagen is dead.
His girl remembers
his quick, bright head,
his well-washed hands
and his lean fingers
and how his cough stained
her bedroom floor.

He'd cough the moon
and a gallon of stars
red as fire torn
from a hundred wars.

All that could cure him
was "faith, hope and charity"—
she couldn't pay his
doctor bills
(and he wouldn't take pity
from her, nor tears)
There'd be no money
in the wills
he'd leave if he lived
a thousand years.

Hagen is dead.
All you can do with him
is dig up his coffin and
look at him there:
he wouldn't be changed much—

he looked like that anyway
and he'd still have
neat, red hair
and a quick, bright head.
That's all you can do.
Hagen is dead.

PRISONER'S SONG

O, Mary's lovelier than anything that grows
out of spring trees that stir
April when my mind goes
around and over her.

I love her more than skies bright with the wind and sun
and all my thoughts arise
to travel, one by one,
into her lips and eyes.

She shuts me in her; she holds all my blood and brain
under her lock and key.
Christ! I'm in jail again—
she'll never let me free.

Sometimes, my blind dreams float far—like a wanderer
I go away, remote;
then I return to her
with panic in my throat.

He's a good Jewish boy,
why does he keep
telling how rotten things
grow in his sleep. . . .
come in his sleep
and fall into his eyes:
dead men and crazy girls
walking through houses and
into the street,
dead men and crazy girls
selling red flowers for
pieces of meat.
Doesn't he know that they're
nothing but lies,
lies that he makes in his
head when he says
I am his mother and
he is my father and
King God will marry us
in a white dress
from his beard to his feet,
with no shoes on his feet,
standing on air
while we sit on the floor,
kissing and kissing and . . . .

I am afraid of him;
I wish I didn't
love him anymore.

Why should I leave him;
he's good to me.
God, but he's beautiful
with ice-gold hair:
look at his eyes now—
blue from the sea,
cut by the wind
to a short, bright stare.

He says I can't go—
can't leave his blood
that runs through my thighs and
I can't walk away. . . .
He gives me power
to move as I should
and all too soon
I'll be still someday.

He stands above me
and over my head
just as the trees rise
out of the ground
into the wet clouds
that mingle and spread
falling in rain and
in one deep sound.

Maybe my legs won't
walk: hip and knee,

feet are his mind
with his thoughts inside.
Why should I leave him;
he's good to me. . . .

Maybe the world
isn't new and wide.

HUSBANDRY

When I saw Jane
abed with John
I laughed aloud
and felt my brain
go dancing through
my blood. I saw
white, rotten earth
that John's knees plowed,
moist with young worms,
blind, giving birth
to new worms. . . .
Law
of Abraham,
erect, from high:
Go ye forth
and multiply. . . .

I saw Jane's thighs
locked round a
lamp post. Knowingly
her cool flanks moved.
A slow moonrise
clarified
my cuckoldry.
I felt myself
go underground
with mildewed kings
and murderers

and poor damned fools
where no one stirs
(even Cæsar
makes no sound)
and fools are
afraid to weep. . . .

while Jane and John
kissed again
(sweet dreams) asleep.

Spirits rousing out of air—
they are here and shut between
gasps of time that dead men share
with the graveyard and the bell
that swings their bones with music down. . . .
and down. . . . down. . . .
where cold Cæsar fell
open eyed.
I knew a man
who fed his wits with such as these
to guard himself from tall, dark streets
where women's flesh grew white and trees
were frozen in an iron square. . . .

And on him came a caravan
of noises that went through his veins. . . .

He smiled at ghosts, then took a bride
from old, green Egypt, for her breath
filled his lungs with ancient prayer,
till, he too, closed his lips and died.

LOVE SONG: TWENTY-THIRD STREET

There was a pale gold girl coming out of Asia,
walking out of Asia with white hills behind her,
out of the deep noise of Buddha and Jehovah,
she came walking where swift waves stir.

There were drunken bells in great temples of thunder,
ringing out full prayers to sad priests in the sunshine,
heavy with black cloth and senile with hunger,
they drank impotence in red wine.

Away she came then, but always out of Asia;
she is always walking from out of the sorrow,
from the curved loins of the black god, Jehovah,
rising behind her where dark winds blow.

O METAPHYSICAL HEAD

O METAPHYSICAL HEAD

The man was forever haunted by his head,
this John Brown's body head—
John Brown's body lies—
John Brown's body lies—
John Brown's body lies—
its head goes marching on—
triumphant, bowing to its friends,
lost in a crowd, then bright as dawn
found again, shining through streets,
laughing, happy by god, drunk, merry old head,
two cocktails and a bottle of champagne
lighting the dark corners in its brain.

A taxi. Home. O, metaphysical head,
the world is too small for it,
barefooted, naked in a bedroom. Bed.
It is awake, remembering, thinking:
(I have seen this head too often,
this too-familiar head, yet it changes, changes. . . .
I have seen this young Cæsar head
rising above a summer hill, bland and omnipotent,
to meet its love, to see her rise
to this head and with closing eyes
and open lips drinking
the head down until
its brain enters her body
and its will
becomes her will.)

And now, the head goes rolling down the hill,
(uxorious head)
rolls into darkness, sleeps:
grows large in dreams, serene, awful,
becomes God, opens its mighty lips
crying, *Let there be light*
in this dream. Let all
all the women who have not worshipped
this head come naked and ashamed before it,
suffering their little children
to come unto it.
Pity for little children,
conceived in sin,
not fathered by this head
but from the needs
of other men.

Awake again, rising from the dream
into the bedroom, eyelids closed,
the head lost in space,
fixed in ecstatic peace,
senses warm, fluid in the body,
but the head, the wingèd, haloed head gone,
gone where all godheads go,
singing, *Heaven, heaven.* . . .

No,
found somewhere in a gutter,
pitiful, blind, sallow.
(And curious friends examine it,

saying, It shall never rise again,
poor fellow.
Put it away.
It hurts us.
Poor fellow,
no words were made to say
how sad we feel. An ugly head—
see what's become of John—
we're sorry, but we must be moving on.)

The head gone. Irrevocably gone,
no longer magnificent, the speaker of the word,
divine, exalted, tilting backward in a barber's chair,
august, revered,
floating above a glass-topped desk,
making its power heard
roaring into a telephone,
then brisk, attentive,
meeting its clients and its creditors,
then finally tired, meditating restfully
on the flat bosoms of its stenographers,
on the undetermined virginity of its stenographers.

There would be no offices for headless men,
no girls, nor wives,
only the subway entrances where one may stand
unseeing (almost unseen)
with right arm raised, the index finger of the hand
pointing where the head had been,
the left hand catching pennies.

John Brown's body goes
begging underground,
John Brown's body—
(No one would dare look at the creature;
it could stand,
a monument for years,
headless, quiet,
forever catching pennies
in its hand.)

Everybody give the big boy a hand,
a big hand for the big boy, Dempsey,
failure king of the U.S.A.

Maybe the big boy's coming back,
there're a million boys that want to come back
with hell in their eyes and a terrible sock
that almost connects.
They've got to come back, out of the street,
out of some lowdown, lousy job
or take a count with Dempsey.

When he's on his knees for a count
and a million dollars cold,
a million boys go down with him
yelling:
Hit him again Dempsey,
kill him for me Dempsey,
Christ' sake Dempsey,
my God they're killing Dempsey,
it's Dempsey down, Dempsey, Dempsey.

The million men and a million boys,
come out of hell and crawling back,
maybe they don't know what they're saying,
maybe they don't dare,
but they know what they mean:

Knock down the big boss,
o, my little Dempsey,
my beautiful Dempsey
with that Godinheaven smile
and quick, god's body leaping,
not afraid, leaping, rising—
hit him again, he cut my pay check, Dempsey.
My God, Dempsey's down—
he cut my pay check—
Dempsey's down, down,
the bastards are killing Dempsey.
Listen, they made me go to war
and somebody did something wrong to my wife
while I was gone.
Hit him again Dempsey, don't be a quitter
like I am Dempsey,
o, for Jesus Christ, I'm out.
I can't get up, I'm dead, my legs
are dead, see, I'm no good,
they got me and I'm out,
down for the count.
I've quit, quit again,
only God save Dempsey, make him get up again,
Dempsey, Dempsey.

LONGFACE MAHONEY DISCUSSES HEAVEN

If someone said, *Escape,*
let's get away from here,
you'd see snow mountains thrown
against the sky,
cold, and you'd draw your breath and feel
air like cold water going through your veins,
but you'd be free, up so high,
or you'd see a row of girls dancing on a beach
with tropic trees and a warm moon
and warm air floating under your clothes
and through your hair.
Then you'd think of heaven
where there's peace, away from here
and you'd go someplace unreal
where everybody goes after something happens,
set up in the air, safe, a room in a hotel.
A brass bed, military hair brushes,
a couple of coats, trousers, maybe a dress
on a chair or draped on the floor.
This room is not on earth, feel the air,
warm like heaven and far away.

This is a place
where marriage nights are kept
and sometimes here you say, Hello
to a neat girl with you
and sometimes she laughs
because she thinks it's funny to be sitting here

for no reason at all, except perhaps,
she likes you daddy.
Maybe this isn't heaven but near
to something like it,
more like love coming up in elevators
and nothing to think about, except, o god,
you love her now and it makes no difference
if it isn't spring. All seasons are warm
in the warm air
and the brass bed is always there.

If you've done something
and the cops get you afterwards, you
can't remember the place again,
away from cops and streets—
it's all unreal—
the warm aír, a dream
that couldn't save you now.
No one would care
to hear about it,
it would be heaven
far away, dark and no music,
not even a girl there.

BRIDGEWATER JONES: IMPROMPTU IN A SPEAKEASY

When you've been through what I've been through
over in France where war was hell
and everything turned to blood and mud
and you get covered with blood and rain
and rain and mud
then you come back home again,
come back home and make good in business.
You don't know how and you don't know why;
it's enough to make God stand still and wonder.
It's something that makes you sit down and think
and you want to say something that's clear and deep,
something that someone can understand:
that's why I got to be confidential
and see things clear and say what I mean,
something that's almost like a sermon,
o world without end,
amen.

When you can't see things then you get like Nelly
and somebody has to put you out
and somebody has to put you away
but you can always see through Nelly.
She unrolled like a map on the office floor,
you could see her in the dark—
a blind pink cat
in the back seat of the Judge's car.
But she'd get cold in the Globe Hotel,
singing songs like the songs of Solomon,

making the Good Book sound immoral
then she'd say she was Mother Mary
and the strength of sin is the law.
World without end
amen.

Gentlemen, I had to fire Nelly,
she didn't see when a man's in business,
she didn't know when a man's a Christian
you can't go singing the Songs of Solomon,
shouting *Holy, holy, holy,*
making Mother of Christ a whore,
cold as rain,
dead blood and rain like the goddam war,
cold as Nelly telling you hell you killed her baby,
then she couldn't take a letter
but would sit down and cry
like rain.

It got so bad I couldn't sleep
with her hair and eyes and breasts and belly
and arms around me
like rain, rain,
rain without end
amen.

I tell you gentlemen almighty god,
I didn't kill her dead baby,
it was the rain
falling on men and girls and cities.

Ask the Judge (he's got a girl)
about a baby:
a baby wants life and sun, not rain by god that's death when
you float a baby down the sewer into the
East River with its lips
making foam at the stern of ships
head on for Liverpool in rain.

You can't see what happens in rain
(only god knows, world without end)
maybe war, maybe a dead baby.
There's no good when rain falls on a man;
I had to make it clear,
that's what I wanted to explain.

You can't fight God,
I know the facts, I said
to Mabel: I know what's going to happen,
it always does. You might as well be dead
if you get violent, he gets you.
I've seen him work before,
I said to her:
You wake up at night violent—
you wish to Christ the Woolworth Tower were
ten thousand stories high
and you on top nude naked, shouting at God,
shouting get out of my sky.
It's mine. I went the limit with Jake—
it's my affair.
I don't know where he's gone, or if he's dead,
or if he goes
to hell.

I'm going to jump. I'm going to make a splash
and spoil somebody's nice clean suit of clothes.
This sky is mine.
I got a right to jump.
I'm tired of my eyes and hair,
my arms and legs, I've seen them all
since I was born.
They're going to fall
in one grand smash. I got a right
to tell my boss to go to hell this way

and get some other fool to take my job
and wait a week for Saturday.

I said, God's watching you:
they'll call the wagon then,
they'll run you into Bellevue,
fighting like tigers in a crazy zoo
to get you into bed and hold you there
with a strong arm doctor feeling you to see
what's wrong and ask you where
Jake is and calm you down.
And the screams
of crazy women in the halls
will be like whispers in your dreams.
They'll make you go to sleep in sleep that seems
like sleep forever.

And when they let you out
you'll be quiet, you won't try
to take a drink of lysol for they might
get you again. Until you die
you'll keep yourself a secret,
talking to yourself in the streets,
fighting God on Broadway.
I know how God works, I told her,
when you fight his laws.
I saw what was going to happen

and it always does.

TIME AND ISIDORE LEFKOWITZ

It is not good to feel old
for time is heavy,
time is heavy
on a man's brain,
thrusting him down,
gasping into the earth,
out of the way of the sun
and the rain.

Look at Isidore Lefkowitz,
biting his nails, telling how
he seduces Beautiful French Canadian
Five and Ten Cent Store Girls,
beautiful, by god, and how they cry
and moan, wrapping their arms
and legs around him
when he leaves them
saying:
Good bye,
good bye.

He feels old when he tells
these stories over and over,
(how the Beautiful Five and Ten Cent Store
Girls go crazy when he puts on
his clothes and is gone),
these old lies
that maybe nobody at all believes.

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He feels old thinking how
once he gave five
dollars to a girl
who made him feel like other men
and wonders if she is still alive.
If he were a millionaire,
if he could spend five dollars now,
he could show them how
he was strong and handsome then,
better than other men.

But it is not good to feel old,
time is too heavy,
it gets a man
tired, tired
when he thinks how time wears
him down
and girls, milk-fed, white,
vanish with glorious smiling millionaires
in silver limousines.

JESSE JAMES, THE PREACHER'S SON

Jesse James loved God and religion,
his wife and farm
till he couldn't stand them—
then his blood got warm
and his eyes got a beautiful baby stare.
O, he didn't smoke, drink, chew or swear,
but he liked to see sweet Hell cut loose
from the sharp blue barrel
of a smart six shooter.
(This was Jesse's cure for the blues)
He liked to see the red, dead head
of a neat bank clerk roll on the floor,
then Jesse would pray to God and Jesus
he wouldn't be a bad boy no more.
(Jesse James, Jesse James,
Jesse loved God
and God in his heaven
loved Jesse James)
Jesse James loved the little white church
and the green grass hill where the tomb stones grew
and a fine store suit like a business man—
that's how they got him with a bullet through
the back of his head and he fell (God knows!)
all dressed up in his Sunday clothes.
O, there's no ghost of Jesse James,
Jesse James has gone to heaven. . . .
Jesse James, Jesse James,
Jesse loved God,
and God in his heaven
loved Jesse James.

It is enough for me to tremble,
my vital organs directed toward the sun,
toward the stars,
trembling.

It is better for me to stand at street corners
staring at women, seeing their bodies flowering
like new continents, hills warm in sunshine and
long deep rivers,
(even as I am,
trembling)
than to be nothing, to fade away in grass and stone.

It is better for me to believe nothing
than to be nothing,
better for me
not to fight, to let cops and truck drivers
crash through my brains, trample my entrails,
o, let me cry out my rage against millions,
carry my remains to the President,
up the steps of the White House
to be deodorized by the Department of Justice
and the Secretary of State,
thenceforth expunged
from the Congressional Record.
(But I shall be intact,
no word spoken,
like laughter in my mother's womb, a pointless joke
with no beginning and no end)

And if you hear me crying: My god, my god, my god
down streets and alleys,
I am merely trembling (afraid, my god, my god,
to be nothing, to fade away
in grass, in stone.)

COLUMBO DOMINICO

Columbo Dominico
dead on Minetta Street
is no finality,
even with a regiment of bullets in his back,
is no end of things;
maybe the cops got him (he was out of work,
vagrant, selling bad booze)
maybe his brother, maybe his girl
shouting: *You go to hell, get out of here,*
good bye, Dominico
and Dominico, surprised, unsteady,
leaping into eternal æther
crying: Viva, viva anarchy!

Here is no end of things.
Even a frozen outpost of the Salvation Army
walking down the winter street,
seeing Dominico,
quickens his feet,
lifts up his watery eyes and sings:
Jesus saves and his sweet breath
wakens all the sinners in the halls of death
and his eyes shine bright and his heart beats warm
as he gathers all the sinners in the crook of his arm.
Jesus saves, Jesus saves.
Here is no finality.
Dominico dead
mingles with all the dead,
his gigantic shade

(an elbow leaning on the Woolworth Tower)
pierces lovestruck Dante with a shoulder blade
and spits upon the trembling purpled face
that once was Nero's and the elder Morgan's,
vaulted into space,
it strides with Robespierre,
kisses Marat
and sleeps, relaxed, with Lesbia for an hour.

There is no end of things . . .
Angelo Gorini and Tony Bruno (out of work,
vagrant, selling bad booze)
the cops got them for killing
Columbo Dominico.
Angelo Gorini and Tony Bruno, falling,
slipping into death, calling
out: *By Jesus Christ, we didn't do it,*
viva, viva anarchy,
we love the red flag!

NO COCK CROWS AT MORNING

There is no cock crowing in our bedroom,
waking good morning startled by his cries:
the great bird has vanished in a fiery dream,
his clamorous wings are shut
and his rolling golden eye
has gone blind
and his radiant comb is a laurel of ashes.

Listen, there is no cock crowing
(Somebody murdered someone else's wife
and left a pool of blood in the subway,
crying his matins out of gothic type,
shouting the resurrection and the life,
rising in vapours from an invisible flame,
sloughing his shirt and trousers
in an electric chair)

There is no cock crowing,
but there is a phantom bird walking
through prison walls, walking through streets and houses,
silent, invulnerable, walking over the dead—
over the martyrs and the wrongdoers
there is no cock crowing.

This creature with the mild blue eye
dreaming over his blond mustaches in the subway
and on suburban streets
meets
his evil day
that turns his bones to fuel
and flesh to clay
(poor dog)

One hour
sinks into the next
and the shadow of time
pierces the retina of the mild blue eye.
O see him lie
buried with a woman.
Bend down into the suburbs,
hear her voice
in whispers circling through the noise
of the city.
And what she tells
illuminates the phosphorescent pattern of
his muscles in her brain
and those who hear discern
how mighty tissues burn
with ancient energy:
see the limbs and torso risen
from the earth again

through stones and bricks
and hard pine floors
flowering through bed sheets.

Her unmistakable voice
will point you where
his members were
(now fallen like the fall
of a strong dynasty)
These shall be all
of him forever,
no elegies,
only her voice,
the laughter of old friends
and enemies.

INTERIOR: THE SUBURBS

There is no rest for the mind
in a small house. It moves, looking for God
with a mysterious eye fixed on the bed,
into a cracked egg at breakfast,
looking for glory in an arm chair,
or simply noting the facts of life
in a fly asleep upon the ceiling.

The mind, sunk in quiet places,
(like old heroes) sleeps no more
but walks abroad in a slouch hat
performing adultery at violent street corners,
then trembling, returns,
sadly directs its mysterious eye
into a coffee cup—there is no rest—
for there are many miles to walk in the small house,
traveling past the same chairs, the same tables,
the same glassy portraits on the walls,
flowing into darkness.

There is no victory in the mind
but desperate valor
shattering the four walls,
disintegrating human love
until the iron-lidded mysterious eye
(lowered carefully with the frail body
under churchyard gardens)
stares upward, luminous, inevitable,
piercing solar magnitudes
on a fine morning.

HELLBABIES

Hellbabies sitting in speakeasies
trying to make a million dollars come to life
out of a shot of gin,
trying to make love again
to a new girl,
trying to get out of the way
of sleep and death.

Hellbabies (another brood)
walking through rain,
electric signboards,
in subways,
at shop windows,
their brains filled with tears,
trying to get out of the way
of wives and children
because there are
NO JOBS, NO JOBS
no work, only walking.

Maybe God is waiting for
these hellbabies,
surely, hell is waiting
for them to come home:

Come home, there will be sweet hell tonight,
always ready.

PRONOUN "I"

I.

Unless I am careful,
night will come into me
before I know the quick sun
has fallen through the sky
and into the earth
and into the sea.

Night caught in me,
never to leave me
where streets go by
filled with stark lights
and metal noise of cats,
small and terrible,
where none dare to go
unless they are careful. . . .

Sometimes, I know
that night was always in me,
turning with broad white rays
under the moon,
reaching through long, green days
before my birth-time
where things made sharp noise
with the dark around them:
and it was terrible,
high as steel towers
built upon tall rock

in the black hours
when drunken men work
with the night in them
(they poised and careful!)

With the night in me,
I shall go into it
deeper than rocks are,
deeper than where the worms
follow Eurydice,
deeper than anyone,
dead as King Œdipus
who walked without the sun,
deeper than blood of war
plunged through the earth,
deeper than bones of us
plucked from our ancestors,
now grown infallible. . . .

Unless I am careful,
all night within me
shall fill with the naked eyes
torn from King Œdipus,
there with the rolling head
of ripened Jocasta,
rolling where branches swing
from an oak tree. . . .

and I will step aside
from rails of iron

(where poised and high in air,
men talk to steel cranes
that rise and stride
over the far streets)
then shall I fall from them
who sing my requiem,
deeper than songs are,
unless I am careful
now
careful!

II.

I've been dead so many times,
leaving the legacy of a gray felt hat,
red necktie, gray tweed suit, a pair of spectacles,
in fact, all that
a man remembers,
including several dimes
and nickels and unpaid doctor bills.
(They cured me once, but I eluded them
through subway entrances
down under valleys, hills,
even the trains—myself adroit, slim
fitting between two blocks of stone,
compact, alone)

I've been dead so many times,
forgotten (not quite) my name,
except in print,
except between the lips of a girl,
head back, bare shoulders, small arms lame
with my weight.
One can't
remember much more, being alive
and dead so many times:
all's too short to remember—
how night climbs
and the sun
falls over one.

III.

Come on, boys, save your breath,
see all the wonders of the world—
buy a pair of silk stockings for your sweetie—
all for a nickel, a dime,
a couple of quarters
or a million dollars.
This way, ladies, ladies free

if you put a little paint on,
put a little paint on,
but save, o, save your breath.
(I've been dead,
I know there's no use—
it doesn't pay)
You can't lose
or win—save your breath—
either way.
Even poverty, love and picayune crimes
go down with you,
(I know, I know)
I've been dead so many times.

IV.

O MORS ÆTERNA

Be for a little while eternal,
singing with all the songs in your body
but making no sound.

The Rose of Sharon singing in an old city
was eternal suddenly
for a little while.

And the mountains fell away
and the city sank into earth again
and the voices of dead men came from the ground
crying, Incest and poverty and murder
(all in the many dead years
that had sent them into the earth)
but now rising, crying against the world
and mortal sun and moon and stars,
against life and the masters
in purple victories, clothed with iron wars.

For a little while
the Rose of Sharon sang eternally
until the city came round her again
and there was no sound.

V.

UNFRIENDLY DISCOURSE

1.

What do you want for your money,
sleep,
only more sleep,
trying to remember to forget
somewhere in sleep a dog barks
out of darkness like the roar
of guns following you forever
in war
sunk in your blood.

To remember to forget
a million miles of stone
over your head, under your feet.
Remember to forget but hold
these things somewhere in your brain a minute,
victory a minute:

Eddie Kowolski, lightweight champion,
steel body like a piston
shot through air
gets his man,
gets him down
buries him into the canvas,
pounds him soft, rivets him
into the earth.

Victory a minute, that's all,

darkness again.
The crowd yells:
We want another victory,
victory, by god, victory!

Remember only to forget but hold
another victory:

John Bayliss, bigamist, book-keeper,
kills his wife,
looks into her body, his eyes X ray machines
counting her bones
(sees all,
will tell all later)
victory now,
something done, finished now
(grief and sobs later)

The crowd yells:
Victory,
we want more victory,
after long jobs, after long nights at home,
victory!

2.

These things remember and remembering,
forget again
like the sun thrown flat against buildings
at evening
perishing in grandeur:

There are a million beautiful girls
born yesterday, maybe a week ago,
maybe back a thousand years,
saying,

Once I was beautiful in Embryo, Tennessee,
look at me now
and take me back to Embryo,
here is no place to be
beautiful
        legs and arms
are shadows.
            They are real only
at home
        in Embryo,
take me away.

The ground sinks, the brain trembles,
drinking down
years of darkness,
forgetting to remember the sun,
only sleep for your money,
remembering.

VI.

FLORA

Delicious Flora
with sharp breasts pricking
through rose hedges
has gone away.

Never a man
shall find her walking
through deep grasses
in light of day.

Only in his mind
will her thighs quicken
day and evening,
sunlight and rain:

There, in his dark blood,
will her blood awaken
music and swift limbs
piercing his brain.

VII.

LISTEN FRIEND

This is your friend:
its name, one name, another name
(what does it matter) always changing,
but the movement of its lips, eyes,
always the same,
rising out of streets at night,
rising out of books and furniture
in a warm room,
thrusting its smile into your brain.
Give it a drink and secrets roll
from its lips, a death mask of great
deeds (a drink, o god,
before it coils inward again,
baffled, inarticulate.)

These secrets, men and women,
giants out of Plato, their
faces raised for murder
against this friend; they have betrayed it,
it has escaped to find you.
Keep these secrets green
in your heart (This friend is at your feet,
remember, o remember
it in all seasons whether
grass dies or grows
through April snows
into rich September)

This friend will pour its blood into your blood,
it will stain
your body:
go, question its identity again,
go, ask the girls.
Was it one of your lovers on a foggy night
but warm after a rosy meal when the light
in the hall clicked off and there
was nothing to do but feel
its hands come out of nowhere,
climbing like snakes
out of deep invisible grass.
O god yes.

And it will vanish, but like an hour in the day
return another day
out of the crowds, out of the streets
with a different name
but the inevitable smile
indelible, always the same.

VIII.

PRAISE OUT OF SEASON

Praise the dead (it is spring,
even the stars on a still night
are dangerous)
Praise the dead (the living have no peace,
look, the girl is a tiger
clawing your brain,
there's no release
from devil, god and women
following you through bright
seas at morning
walking over a dark plain
at night)

O, dead ladies please
rise
    rise
up again
with more than beautiful hair
and golden fiery eyes
making death no victory
but sweet limbs glorious
in the full morning sun
out of bed
        and dead men's whispers run
along the grass
following
saying, How beautiful she was.

Praise the dead,
tell how the more
noble cæsars kept their
linen clean
and how the fair
quick faces of young men
looked into death
and entered.
We have lost the fears
breaking their nerves
and tissues.
Halleluiah, amen.

Since this, the deep season
making our dead lives soar
through roots and earth
into trees and flowers
is here,
trust no man in the brief hours
of night or in the long course
of the sun.
Once more
the dead earn praise
while gray roofs lean
through green
fogs remembering
brave trees swaying
through long days
men knew
singing praise.

IX.

HOMESTEAD

This house rises into a metallic sky
a brilliant iron lake under its porticos,
under its balconies and watch towers multiplied
beyond reason and (one, two, three, four) exact calculation.
An institution for the blind,
a sailors' rest (home from the seas)
not quite, but the specific hiding place where John
McCumber Bluethorn, millionaire, sleeps (falls asleep)
after a dozen cocktails.
Expects to die
in the inevitable stronghold for his nerves and tissues.
The bright machinery that was his mind
falls silent.
His factories (men in the street
crying against him and the quick rifles of the State Militia
are quiet now)
Here is the last retreat.
The legend of his wives, his children safe,
locked in iron waters.
His mind, fallen inward, stirs no more,
only the house rises;
count the bricks, the stones
and estimate their power
against wind and rain, time and dissolution.

X.

LADIES EXIT

After certain gentlemen have gone
less dignified, no doubt, but serious,
not entirely broken, a trifle maimed
with no more tremulous
pretense or hope of staying on:
then go, you ladies,
beautiful, beautiful ladies,
there is no longer too much quiet for
round hips, neat breasts and oh
ever so sweetly miraculous smiles.

All of you must go, must go,
taking what is left (a few things)
and then go on many more miles
(a torn chemise, soiled stocking
and a clot of blood in the throat)
A little damaged, perhaps,
but not infirm,
bodies still warm
and voices that break only
(when ladies must be heard)
on a far, sharp note.
And because hands and feet are small,
they are not pitiful,
they are simply going,
vanishing, go all
you ladies, go.

XI.

We who sit with open eyes,
closed lips, and quietly rise,
discreet, whispering good night,
disappearing with a bright
sharp smile,
will be saying yes, yes
(after a while):
yes, yes to neighboring bones
and rocks and roots of trees;
yes, yes to grass
and the stones forever sunken
on our foreheads;
(agreeably, still discreet) yes,
(eagerly) yes, we are here given all our worth:
this broken wood, damp sheet, long growing hair.
(O love, lie closer, love—yes, we shall share
this everlasting earth.)

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